

Japan and South Korea Should Look at the Big Picture to Overcome the Historical Problems

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Today, the new coronavirus infection has spread all over the world. The intensifying feud between the United States and China is becoming the biggest threat to the stability of the world since the US-Soviet conflict. Every day, I realize that we have entered a difficult time that we have never experienced. At the same time, however, I am convinced that if Japan and South Korea, which should be regarded as “solid middle power,” work together, we should be able to play an important role in both the pandemic and the alleviation of the tension between the United States and China.

Unfortunately, however, the actual relationship between Japan and South Korea has been heading in the opposite direction. The public notice issued by the Daegu District Court to seize the assets of Japanese companies in South Korea in relation to the ruling on wartime forced labor will come into effect on August 4. However, the ministers of the Japanese government have only made remarks about imposing sanctions if South Korea converted the seized assets into cash. The Korean government, on their part, has not even shown a willingness to solve this problem through dialogue between Japan and South Korea. The type of attitude that thinks, "If we compromise even a millimeter, we will lose," means that both sides have abandoned diplomacy. If the both governments maintain the attitudes of "Japan First" and "Korea First," the Japan-South Korea relation has no options but to head to the brink of destruction.

We must have a cool head. Today's Japan-Korea relation is not even a zero-sum game, let alone a win-win. Since the ruling by the Supreme Court of South Korea, Japan has been imposing some economic sanctions on South Korea in practical terms, and all South Korea has only retaliated against them. In terms of the GDP per capita, Japan and South Korea are already similar, and the exchange of sanctions will not end with the victory of either country. It only has negative effects on the economies of both countries. The termination of GSOMIA is also mentioned occasionally. However, even if it causes a slight disadvantage to Japan, there is nothing that South Korea can benefit from it, other than letting off some steam. The world will look at us with a sneer as they see Japan and South Korea clinging to the trap of nationalism at a historical time of significant thrust between the United States and China.

Japan's official position on the issue of wartime forced labor is that *it has been resolved by the 1965 Japan-ROK Agreement on the rights for compensation*. Therefore, many Japanese were surprised that the issue of wartime forced labor was brought to the court and felt that they were *betrayed* at the decision of the Korean Supreme Court. On the other hand, in South Korea, it is believed that the rights of individuals to claim compensation will not be extinguished by an international treaty, and the trial went ahead. Regarding this matter, the Japanese government once stated in the Diet session that “the individual claims themselves have not been extinguished in terms of domestic law.” Besides, the majority of argument in the international human rights law today is that “international agreements or treaties between nations cannot extinguish individual rights for compensations.” Since we have reached this point, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe should look at the big picture and state that he will not stick to Japan's conventional position. Now that the Korean Supreme Court's decision has been finalized, it is easy to imagine even for me that it will be difficult for the Korean government to have a fresh negotiation with Japan. However, I would also like President Moon Jae-in to make highly political decisions based on the big picture.

Considering that there is serious emotional entanglement between Japan and South Korea, the two governments may agree to bring the matter to the International Court of Justice or resolve it in the form of arbitration through a third country. Once they decided to enter into a negotiation, it is obvious that all the virtual sanctions currently in place should be lifted immediately.

I have made various statements, believing that Japan has a historical and moral responsibility for colonizing South Korea. My belief remains the same today. However, it is also true that it has been 75 years since the end of Japan's colonial rule, and a new generation is growing in both Japan and South Korea. We should act prudently to avoid an act of folly that would worsen the relationship between Japan and South Korea and pass the worse situation on to next new generations of both countries as *another history*. Japan and South Korea are equally responsible for that.

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